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“No Golfer Left Behind”: How Junior and Family Tees Can Reenergize Your Club

By David Gould, AMF Special Correspondent

Imagine you're part of a committee evaluating plans for a new course or a major renovation. Your group gathers to study the final routing, which projects out to 6,920 yards. Will it take more than 30 seconds for someone to suggest that 100 yards be added, “to get it over 7,000”? If anything it might take 15 seconds.

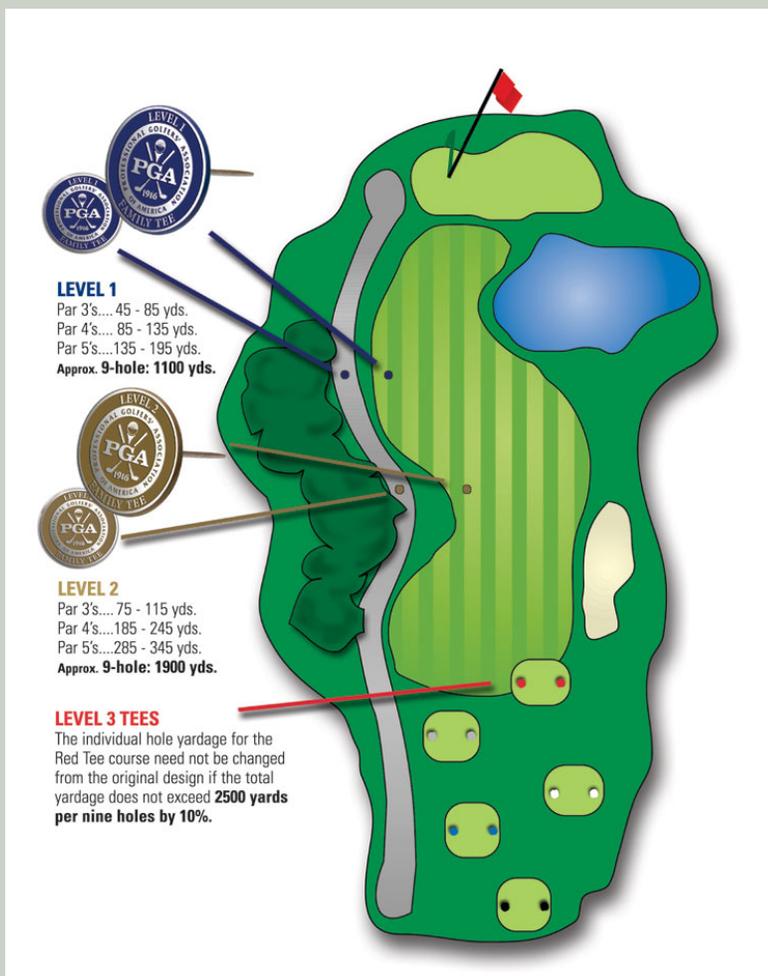
Yardage is good, and more yardage is better—that's been the value system in golf. The famous request made to A.W. Tillinghast by the founders of Winged Foot, “Give us a man-sized course,” epitomizes the mindset. Length makes a course legitimate in the view of skilled players. What the skilled players support, less-skilled players buy into.

Except people aren't really buying in so much these days—in the sense of playing lots of golf at their private clubs. Nor are they ushering in lots of new members who want to do the same. Private-club membership was recently put at 2.1 million, which is 900,000 below the peak of 3 million in the early 1990s. According to the golf research company, Sports & Leisure Research Group, a third of private clubs are engaged in some form of aggressive discounting of membership fees just to survive. “American families have hit the reset button on how they seek to spend their recreational time and dollars,” admitted PGA of America CEO Joe Steranka recently.

AMF members are no different than club professionals generally. They grasp the need for new approaches and ideas to boost participation among club members, with a particular eye toward the wives and children. The head of the family, today's dad, plays his golf on a “hall pass” that's not easily granted.

Our current straits differ from the conditions that gave rise to mixed scotch events and to the junior golf activities long overseen by the lowest-rung assistant on the staff. Those opportunities for family members to use the club's golf facility stemmed from the era when a golf-loving breadwinner set his own schedule and let the misus handle weekend duties involving children. Certain programs and events were put in place to placate the rest of the family, but they are no longer sufficient.

Yardage markers and tee boxes have multiplied in recent decades in a move to accommodate shorter-hitting players. However, 90 percent or more of the yard-



Family Tees can be ordered from U.S. Kids Golf on their website.

ages provided were arrived at by subtraction. The course designer and/or developer looked at the championship-tee lengths and agreed to move forward a fair distance from them. An opposite process is now emphatically suggested—you start from the middle of each green and figure backward from there, using the most reliable and realistic data available to set up starting points based on swing speed and distance capabilities.

What's needed now is a reinvention of the club-golf experience for families choosing to retain their memberships. One vital element of that is the golf course and its playability by younger children and by moms who aren't avid or accomplished golfers. It's time for all beliefs
(Continued on page 8)

about distance and difficulty that club professionals and golf committee men have held dear to be put aside. An approach to course setup that's based on researched fact is required, but as luck would have it that information has been rigorously gathered and is readily available.

The best source of it is from a research group called the Little Foundation, and we'll cut straight to its most enlightening conclusion. Private-club courses have, from their back tees, an effective yardage for many children and for most casual-golfer women that translates for the 12-handicap male equivalent to around 9,000 yards.

If seeing that number made your back spasm, you know how people with driver swing speeds in the 60-65 mph range feel playing regulation courses, even from the most forward set of markers. A set of course-adapting guidelines from the Little Foundation suggests that you plot your women's/junior hole set-ups by using your own 140-yard club to simulate their driver shots. To simulate the longest fairway-wood shot this group could manage, use your own 120-yard club. Bearing in mind the way different greens accept a descending approach shot, you should ensure that a tee marker (many clubs use a simple plate sunk into the turf) is positioned that would allow players with this distance output to reach every green in regulation.

For players who hit their average tee shot 140 yards, this report advises, the optimum course length is 30 times their average drive or 4,200 yards. If you wish to create a next-shortest course setup for these golfers to move up to, a set of tees at 5,100 yards is suggested.

This is an initiative that's been a while in coming and likely needs some time and promotional energy to really take hold. At Baltusrol Golf Club in New Jersey, where AMF member Doug Steffen is head professional, a set of markedly advanced junior tees as recommended by U.S. Kids Golf were put in two seasons ago. According to Baltusrol assistant Scott Wells, the golf staff along with junior-golf committee members spearheaded the effort. He allows that the buzz

around the club after the way-up tees were installed and special scorecards were printed was fairly minimal, but that's reasonable when you consider most members have grown children and thus aren't affected.

"Sure, a lot of members see the plates and kind of shrug," says Wells, "but the segment we're trying to reach appreciates it and they've got a much more comfortable feeling about playing as a family." What the short-hitting family members like, according to Wells, is the feeling that "now they're legit—they have a goal of making par that they can tackle, they've got their own scorecard... it makes them feel involved and wanted, in a way that walking out to the 150 markers couldn't."

Christopher Carme, manager of U.S. Kids Golf's admired Play & Learn program, believes that private-club culture has "undergone a paradigm shift" with the result that clubs have to recruit with the idea of "surrounding the target guy, the dad, by marketing an experience that will make joining a family decision."

The idea is to create a "family course" within your regulation course and offer it as a new and distinct amenity, like a fitness center or an event pavilion. Some family golf, played in the standard setting, has a feeling of duty fulfillment for the spouse and children. "We are pushing beyond just playing to a real level of excitement," says Carme. The concept that a family course most repudiates is the USGA initiative in which a Personal Par number is hung around the child's neck, alienating him from the game's competitive essence. "This hole is 540 yards and your drive goes 100 yards so your par for the hole is 12," Carme says, paraphrasing the USGA concept. "That's not what anyone wants. It's a night-and-day difference when the kid has his own tees, his scorecard that says par 5 on it and a fighting chance to play for the score a grownup would play for."

Golf is tradition-bound, but the private golf club sector can change when it has to. As soon as possible, clubs need to create an all-new golf challenge and invitation to families.

Get Kids off the Range and on the Course

Experts in family golf have some valuable guidance beyond just creating a realistic course to accommodate very slow swing speeds. They advise the PGA pros they work with to:

- ✓ Emphasize playing the course, not hitting on the range, for younger kids. "A nine-year-old sees the range as a way for adults to keep him or her off the course," says Carme. "They only want the 'game' feeling, not something that feels like homework."
- ✓ Make sure you have some stock or supply of clubs made specifically for players with small hands and not much body strength. Don't make them fight a poorly fitting set of clubs.
- ✓ Offer good advice on formats and who plays from which markers. The kids might want their father to hit his normal long clubs from regulation length, to watch long hits in flight. Or, they may want him beside them hitting a lofted club that matches their driver shot. Talk to the family about little competitions they can engage in—for example a 3-3-3 tournament to divide up the nine-hole loop.
- ✓ Use your space in the club newsletter to show the full membership your family program is inspiring participation and enjoyment for parents, kids, grandparents and even guests like the kids' friends from youth soccer and baseball. You know, the activities that are pulling so many of your members away from enjoyable times at the club.